

Forerunners of the Demographic Transition: Jews in Bohemia in the 18th and 19th Centuries – Micro and Macro-data Perspective

Extended abstract

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The paper studies the dynamics and causes of fertility decline among the forerunners of the demographic transition. Jews are often cited in the literature as the forerunners of the demographic transition (Livi-Bacci 1986, Derosas 2003, Schmelz 1971, Della Pergola 1989), but a more detailed description of the transition phases and especially a theoretical explanation of their causes tend to be missing. This paper presents an analysis of fertility decline of Jews in Bohemia from the late 18th century until the Shoah. It tracks the process of Jewish fertility transition in its entirety, through a micro-data samples, and interprets it in its cultural and socio-historical context.

In Bohemia, Jews were a religious and ethnic minority for more than a thousand years. Over the centuries, they experienced many hardships that threatened their continued existence in the country, but until the Second World War none had such far-reaching consequences as to cause the demise of the community. Jews were never effectively banned from Bohemia (unlike in Britain, France, Spain or Austria) and they never witnessed large waves of immigration of fellow Jews from other countries (unlike medieval Poland, or Hungary, Austria, France, Britain and many other Western European countries in the nineteenth century). This continuity and cultural homogeneity and data availability makes Bohemian Jews an ideal case for a study of long-term demographic development.

The data used for the analysis originate (1) from the aggregate sources (such as vital statistics and censuses) and (2) from the micro level data. The second include the data from the "Familianten books" since 1811 and transcribed census forms from the Jewish population censuses of 1792 and 1793. The Familianten books are a unique data source that includes retrospective information on the Familiant families (those who owned Familiant numbers that were limiting the allowed number of Jews in Bohemia until 1849). This source includes retrospective information on the date of marriage (earliest data from 1760), age of the new born men. The second micro-data source from censuses includes information on family structures and life-style of the Jews in Europe at the early modernisation. The censuses survived entirely for the whole territory of Bohemia (part of the Czech Republic today). They consist of detailed information on socio-demographic characteristics of Jews: region and municipality of residence, household structures including names of family members and their relations, as well as on property held and profession of the head of the household. The original censuses were reconstructed and published recently by the archivists from the Charles University in Prague and are available electronically. However they were not yet explored by demographers.

The paper discusses in more detail the structure and content of those sources that were never before used for a demographic research. It shows the first results based on their use for the reconstruction of the family structure and size, age at marriage and birth spacing of the Jewish population. Further exploitation of these data sources in comparative perspective may shed more light on the early stages of the demographic transition and the behaviour of its forerunners. Jews in Bohemia were true forerunners of the demographic transition in Europe with relatively low fertility in marriage already by the end of the 18th century. Combined with relatively low mortality this was a unique combination in Europe that ask for further in-depth research.

The first results of the analysis of the micro-level data are complemented in the paper by the findings from the aggregate data. This macro approach will frame the micro-data findings into a more general picture of the development of the Jewish population as whole and over a long time-span. Most of the aggregate data used were excerpted directly from the primary data sources deposited in the Czech National Archive. The aggregate data analysis shows (Vobecká 2013) that the Jewish crude birth rates were lower than among the gentiles at least since the late 18th century, but Jewish population growth was nevertheless significantly faster than for the general population, as lower levels of (infant) mortality compensated for lower fertility. After the Revolution of 1848, Bohemia went through accelerated changes in political arrangements, citizen rights and in the economy. Jews acquired equal civil rights with gentiles and the two populations were confronted with similar chances for development for the first time ever. Jewish mobility, both social and spatial (urbanisation), was very dynamic. It took the Jewish population about four decades to establish themselves within the urban middle and upper middle class. At the same time fertility declined fast. Jewish women of childbearing age consciously limited their higher order births within marriage already in the 1860s, and they married later than

previous cohorts. I argue that the fast fertility decline was triggered by the new socioeconomic circumstances, but that the ideational ground was ready for that change at the same time. The secular education and Haskalah have influenced Jewish education and spiritual life already from 1790s. Cohort fertility data from 1930 show that Jewish fertility became increasingly similar to that of the gentiles in the same socio-economic class. The paper presents a detailed study of Jewish fertility decline and highlights key historical and social interdependencies. It concludes that the necessary (but not sufficient) conditions for anticipated fertility decline are: a decline in mortality, upward social mobility aspirations (achievement values), high human capital, low religiosity, and a favorable legal and socio-economic environment.

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